

Exhibit Reviews

Comptes rendus d'expositions

Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Panache: Nineteenth-Century Ladies' Fashion*

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Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Panache: Nineteenth-Century Ladies' Fashion*

Curator: Joan Seidl, Vancouver Museum

Designer: Delma French, Canadian Museum of Civilization

Itinerary: Western Development Museum, Saskatoon, February to May 1993; Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, June 17, 1993, to January 16, 1994; Western Development Museum, Moose Jaw, April 5 to July 10, 1994

I have twice visited the exhibit *Panache: Nineteenth-Century Ladies' Fashion*, a travelling exhibit from the Vancouver Museum (VM) currently showing at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). I was eager to see this exhibit, having read that it examined nineteenth-century women's fashion and its relationship to the socially constructed image of women and femininity. This was not the first exhibit to examine such a topic. A number of exhibits have either touched on or dealt directly with the social implications of fashion on the lives of women,¹ a topic that one would think would have limitless potential, particularly given its relevance to the lives of women today.

I visited this exhibit, like many of its visitors I would guess, with certain expectations relating to my particular experience, interests and concerns. Unlike most visitors, I returned to this exhibit for a second impression, and later, for the purposes of this review, I acquired some background information on the evolution of the exhibit. Although information about the history of the exhibit, gleaned from interviews with some of the personnel involved in its creation,² did enhance my understanding of the exhibit, generally the visiting public is not privileged to such information. What the audience expe-

riences is the final product. In this review, I would like first to share my impressions of this exhibit, without reference to the exhibit history.

The story line of *Panache* examines changing trends in fashion from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, using a dozen examples of upper-middle-class ladies' costume from that era. The century is divided into several periods, each characterized by a style of dress and corresponding ideal feminine silhouette. Each section dedicated to a period includes a brief explanation of the style of the time, with some commentary on the social position of women and the position of fashion as a reflection of social values, followed by a panel or two discussing the design elements of the costumes on display. Text is presented in a levelled format so as to accommodate visitors with various levels of interest in the subject. Skilfully, the curator has combined three themes into the exhibit text. First, there are details on fashion design and the relationship of the changing idealized silhouette to broad aesthetic trends. Second, there is discussion of the impact of restrictive fashions on the everyday lives of women at that time, such as the difficulties they encountered with movement and the accidents and injuries they sustained. Finally, the text incorporates social analysis, linking women's fashion to such social codes as conspicuous consumption.³

Thus, the exhibit's main message, as I read it, is a simple and important one: fashion is not arbitrary; in fact, it plays an important role illustrating and reinforcing the values of a society at a particular point in time.

However, what is remarkable about this exhibit, as it is presented at the CMC, is not the message but its delivery. The exhibit design is strong and coherent, and the design elements

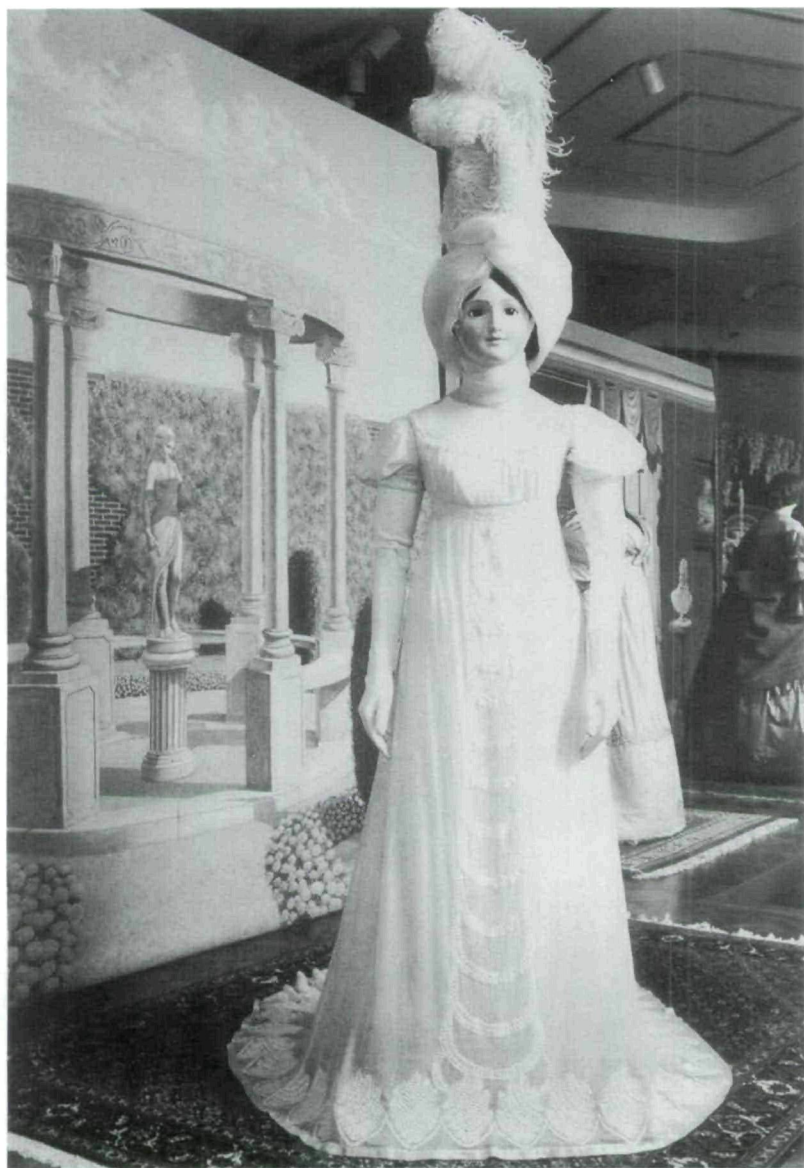


Fig. 1
 Wedding dress,
 French, 1807. (Courtesy
 CMC, M.C.N. H973.78.1,
 Steven Darby,
 photographer)

are clearly thought out, well researched and beautifully orchestrated. Nevertheless, the straightforward but critical message is overshadowed by the design elements of the exhibit.

The approach to the exhibit is inviting. Low, warm lighting, foliage in urns, comfortable seating and period music create a cosy feeling in this modern space. The dresses are presented on Oriental rugs atop parquet risers set against sepia-tone backdrops of Victorian interiors and period gardens (Fig. 1).

Of course, these settings are intended to reflect the contexts in which these dresses would have been worn. But given the soothing atmosphere this design provides, compounded by today's nostalgic popularity of all things

Victorian, one must ask how effectively the exhibit's message comes across to the average visitor who is unfamiliar with "beauty by impairment" or the commoditization of women's fashion, that is to say, who is not well versed in feminist discourse.

During my visits I eavesdropped to get a sense of visitor response; most of the visitors were women. I asked the information officer on duty about the public reaction to *Panache*. She told me that some people were enthralled by the beautiful dresses, whereas others were completely uninterested. She also said that she thought people did not realize "what it meant to wear a dress with a 17-inch waist." In effect, she suggested that some visitors missed one of the major points of the exhibit. Judging by the "oohs" and "aahs" and "isn't that pretty" comments, I do not think the exhibit caused visitors to reflect on what it meant to be a woman in those days or, perhaps more importantly, to challenge the idea that women of today have truly made progress.

On my second visit I listened in some detail to the stories that older women were telling their companions, particularly younger women. These were nostalgic stories centred around the romance of the garments, their femininity and their evocative qualities. Although few of these women would have worn such garments, undoubtedly they would have remembered their mothers doing so. Perhaps for these women, this exhibit was not about the objectification of women, but rather about nostalgia. Certainly personal meaning may be derived from nostalgic reminiscences. However, while the impression of the exhibit's design may be nostalgic, the written text is not. The message sent by the design, and the way in which the material culture is presented, is so strong that it negates the critical message of the written text.

Thus, depending on one's expectations and reading of this exhibit, the design is either a great strength or a great weakness. No matter where one's personal interests lie, the fundamental impression of this exhibit is that of packaging rather than content. In an exhibit that examines appearances, it may seem fitting that style triumphs over substance. However, in an exhibit of fashion, one must surely question how the contextualization of ladies' costume becomes, in effect, mere accessorizing of beautiful feminine objects.

I interviewed some of those involved in the creation of *Panache*. The travelling exhibit evolved out of a temporary exhibit created by the VM. Curated by Ivan Sayers, the in-house

exhibit examined 200 years of women's fashion, from the late eighteenth century to the present, and included over 80 costumes, many from the curator's personal collection. This was a large-scale exhibit, covering about 830 m², and including a wide variety of costume types, such as sports and occupational clothing, as well as elegant evening wear. Sayers says his central thesis in the in-house exhibit was that the gradual emancipation of women from restrictive clothing paralleled women's actual political and social emancipation. Shortly after the exhibit's opening in 1990, Sayers resigned from his position at the museum.

Nevertheless, *Panache* was a huge success. Joan Seidl, hired to replace Sayers in 1992, was asked to prepare the exhibit for travel. Seidl, who has a keen interest in women's history, faced several challenges in the organization of the travelling exhibition. Many of the 80-some costumes from the in-house exhibit were on loan to the museum and were not made available by their owners for travel. Other costumes were too fragile by conservational standards to travel. Furthermore, the travelling exhibit had to be cut down to fit a 230 m² exhibit space. Under these constraints, Seidl

adjusted the story line to cover the period from the late eighteenth century to the 1930s. The resulting travelling exhibit package contained 24 costumes, including evening dresses, a travel costume, a maternity dress and a tea gown, among others.

However, when the CMC agreed to accept the exhibit, the CMC team chose to limit the exhibit to a dozen dresses from the nineteenth century to early twentieth century.⁴ This decision to focus the exhibit was based on the fact that the pieces from the twentieth century were not as strong as the earlier ones, says CMC designer Delma French.

The CMC apparently faced a considerable challenge preparing what they received from the VM for exhibition at their museum. The VM sent the costumes, mannequins and text copy to the CMC, as well as a conservator. This left the CMC with the responsibility for the conception and creation of the entire exhibit design. The designer, French, a former curator of history, undertook this task with the help of illustrator Gordon Webber.⁵ The design of this exhibit was important to the museum also. The hall in which *Panache* is installed is a high-profile one, since it is the first exhibit



Fig. 2
Four dresses illustrate the changing silhouette of women's fashion in the Victorian era. They are (left to right) the broadening silhouette, the hooped skirt, the triangular skirt and the bustle dress. (Courtesy CMC, Steven Darby, photographer)

hall that visitors encounter after they enter the museum. The design, French says, had to make an impact. The painted backdrops, incorporating a significant amount of historical research on period furnishings and architecture, were hung behind the porcelain-faced mannequins featured in the exhibit.

Interestingly, these mannequins, which Sayers had made specially for the original exhibit, proved very difficult to work with, according to Seidl and CMC curator Tina Bates. The mannequins' stiff construction meant that dressing and undressing them was hazardous to the fragile costumes. Seidl also points out that these mannequins are smaller than life-sized and that their faces are based on those of nineteenth-century dolls. The message, albeit perhaps unintentional, inferred from the presence of these mannequins was that the actual women who wore these dresses were as diminutive and doll-like.

On my visits to *Panache* I noticed there was one incongruous element. About midway through the exhibit there is a large, full-length mirror angled so that visitors cannot miss catching a glimpse of themselves as they pass by. Also reflected in the mirror is a part of the exhibit, including several dresses, with backdrops and other visitors. This modern mirror is clearly not meant to be part of the Victorian interior. It seems deliberately anachronistic and, paired with an old camera perched on a stand at the other side of the exhibit, makes an interesting statement about our culture's visual preoccupation (Fig. 2). We can look at ourselves, compare our appearance with the forms that became the models of femininity in the nineteenth century, and we can even watch other visitors making similar observations. As it turns out, this mirror is an addition of CMC's and part of an animation program the museum developed for this exhibit.⁶ Behind the mirror is stashed part of the museum's hands-on collection, including period costumes and acces-

sories that visitors are encouraged by an animator to try on. The animator, using a mannequin with layers of underclothes, also demonstrates how a woman in the Victorian era would have dressed herself. This is all part of CMC's school program for students from elementary and secondary schools.

Considering that so much of what the visitor experiences at CMC's installation of *Panache* is not a product of the original in-house exhibit at the VM, it is not surprising that the final product is very different than it was originally conceived by the first curator, Sayers, or by his successor, Seidl.

The inevitable comparison between an exhibit and its descriptive book is apt in that the museum exhibit is both more and less than the monograph. The exhibit's weakness is that the curator can go into relatively little depth and that themes must be kept relatively simple, given that one can only expect minimal reading on the part of the visitor. However, the strength of the exhibit is that it does not require extensive text to communicate its message. Rather, it relies on what makes it unique from books: the evocative and educational value of material culture. Exhibits also rely, sometimes quite heavily, on their design to aid in the communication of their message. Design is never neutral; choices are made, by the designer and the curator, that influence how the message is delivered or obscured. In this version of *Panache*, there is a disjunction between the original intention of the curator Sayers and the product as it is presented at CMC, as indeed there is a disjunction between the message delivered in the text and the one that is relayed by the exhibit's design. Perhaps none of this is surprising, given the exhibit's history. However, the visitor is left only with the final product, with few clues to that complicated history, and what makes the greatest impression is the exhibit's appearance.

NOTES

1. Examples of such exhibits include "Souffrir pour être belle" at the Musée de la civilisation in Québec, "With Body and Soul – and Rouge on the Cheeks" at the Women's Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, and "Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender, and Power" at the Smithsonian Institution.
2. I interviewed Ivan Sayers, former curator of history, and Joan Seidl, current curator of history at the VM, designer Delma French, Tina

- Bates, curator of history, and Elaine Copeland, in charge of school programs, at the CMC.
3. In my view, although this was a costume exhibit, I do not believe this orientation precluded the introduction of such issues as the prevalence of disorders, which the Victorians called "pathologies," such as hysteria and anorexia nervosa, associated with the ideals of femininity at the time. As a young woman in a generation of women suffering from eating disorders and

pressures to conform to feminine ideals, I would have appreciated a more issue-based approach. Inclusion of this sort of content would have made the link between the experience of the haute-bourgeoisie and that of my generation perhaps more direct. Nevertheless, the exhibit did focus on costume and such albeit related social phenomena were not central to the exhibit's theme.

4. When *Panache* travelled to the Western Development Museum in Saskatoon, all 24 costumes were exhibited. The final venue for the exhibit

is the Western Development Museum in Moose Jaw.

5. In addition to being responsible for the entire design package, French also purchased about ten fashion plates illustrating fashions of the period, which are also displayed in the exhibition hall.
6. Along with the exhibit design, CMC was responsible for all exhibit programming. According to Elaine Copeland, the VM put together a similar roster of programming when *Panache* was exhibited there.

The Art Gallery of Ontario, *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle from Canadian Collections*

MICHAEL LARGE

The Art Gallery of Ontario, *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle from Canadian Collections*

Curators: Katherine Lochnan, Art Gallery of Ontario, Douglas E. Schoenherr, National Gallery of Canada and Carole Silver, Yeshiva University, New York

Designers: Merritt Price (Manager, Exhibition Design), Steve Boyle, Jim Bourke, Chris Arnold and George Bartosik (Manager, Technical Services)

Itinerary: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, June 25 to September 6, 1993; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, October 22, 1993, to January 16, 1994; Musée du Québec, Québec City, February 16 to May 15, 1994; Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, July 23 to October 9, 1994.

Publication: Catalogue, 294 pp., edited by Katherine Lochnan, Douglas E. Schoenherr and Carole Silver, published by the Art Gallery of Ontario and Key Porter Books

William Morris is consistently seen as the most significant of nineteenth-century designers because of his influence on subsequent generations. The chief reason for his stature has been his identification and eloquent discussion of issues that are still central for designers, including the role of the professional designer in industry and in society, and the relationship between function, materials and aesthetics. Morris's life (1834–1896) coincided with the



Fig. 1
St. Agnes and St. Alban
in Procession, ca 1864,
William Morris. Private
Collection, Ottawa.
(Courtesy AGO)

transformation of a traditional, agricultural society by Victorian capitalism, and the contradictions in his thought and work reflect the confused responses of his age to this chaotic process of industrialization. Morris cannot be